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The debate over Nashville policing and what’s missing | Opinion

As crime trends improve and concerns about surveillance grow, Nashville must confront the real trade-offs shaping public safety and decide which costs it's willing to accept.

Halim Genus Guest Columnist
May 20, 2026, 5:07 a.m. CT



Mayor O'Connell outlines further dropping Nashville violent crime strategies

For several months, Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell has been highlighting the city's dropping violent crime rate this year. He said he already has ideas in mind for how to continue the trend into 2026.

Key Points

A new report shows Nashville's violent crime rate is down but remains higher than in most peer cities.

Nashville has one of the most restrictive frameworks for public safety technology, creating capacity trade-offs.

As Nashville’s conversations around policing and public safety technology become increasingly polarized, a basic question is missing from the debate: What trade-offs come with the public safety choices Nashville makes, and which ones are we most willing to accept?

That is why The Nashville Police + Public Safety Alliance commissioned an independent report by John Buntin, a crime and public safety researcher and former Mayor John Cooper's policy and community safety director. Buntin compares Nashville's crime trends and police resources with those of nine demographic, economic and geographic peer cities – cities we compete with for residents, jobs, tourism and talent.

We're always working to improve your experience. Let us know what you think.

Here's what the data shows.



Commander Carlos Lara cuts the ribbon during a ribbon cutting ceremony for MNPd's new Southeast Precinct Friday, Nov. 7, 2025. Alan Poizner/For The Tennessean

Crime is down, but Nashville still trails peer cities

Nashville has made real progress with public safety. The violent crime rate is now lower than pre-pandemic levels, and our homicide rate has fallen. However, our violent crime rate remains elevated compared to most of our peer cities. Aggravated assaults and motor vehicle thefts, in particular, remain above pre-pandemic levels. Robberies are down sharply, but interpersonal violence has intensified.

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Understanding these shifts is essential for designing effective public safety strategies.

We know crime is complex – shaped, in part, by poverty, lack of opportunity and personal and family trauma. At the same time, research consistently shows police can reduce crime, particularly violent crime, when departments are sufficiently staffed and strategically deployed using evidence-based approaches.

But the Metro Nashville Police Department has fewer officers per square mile than any peer city studied, while response times for highest-priority calls remain comparatively high. Nashville also uses fewer of the technological tools adopted by police departments in our peer cities. What do these factors say about our public safety priorities, realities, and goals?



45 Photos

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Tennessee special legislative session on public safety continues in Nashville.

Tennessee's special legislative session on public safety goes into the fourth day.

Restricting technology has real capacity trade-offs

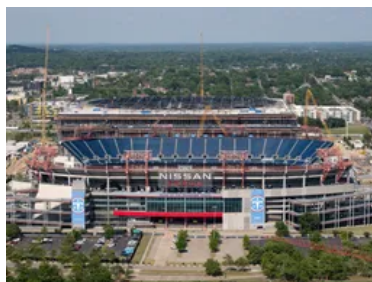
The findings reveal some important trade-offs about technology that we have not meaningfully considered as a community. Concerns about civil liberties and government surveillance are real and valid. In other cities, federal immigration authorities have used License Plate Readers (LPRs) to support immigration enforcement efforts.

There are valid concerns that police monitoring tools would disproportionately affect communities of color. At the same time, our report finds Nashville has developed one of the country's most restrictive frameworks governing the use of public safety technologies.

DIVE DEEPER

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If Nashville limits the use of tools that other cities rely on to expand investigative and operational capacity, are we prepared to make equivalent investments elsewhere, particularly in police staffing? And if so, how will we do that at a time when departments across the country continue

to struggle with recruitment and retention? These are essential questions about capacity, priorities and whether we are being honest about the trade-offs required to achieve the public safety outcomes we expect in our city.



6 Photos

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See inside Metro Nashville Police Department's new \$12M hangar

Take a look inside Metro Nashville Police Department's new \$12M hangar.

Forcing an honest accounting of where Nashville stands

This report does not say whether Nashville should adopt new technology or hire more officers.

Those decisions belong to policymakers and the residents who elect them. But the current debate is too polarized to produce good answers. Both sides are talking past each other, and the trade-offs are going unnamed. The Alliance hopes this report changes that by grounding the conversation in data, forcing an honest accounting of where Nashville stands and making clear what the status quo actually costs.

If Nashville wants faster response times, higher clearance rates and the ability to locate missing persons or dangerous suspects quickly, we should honestly examine which combination of staffing, technology and deployment strategies makes those outcomes possible.



Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake, center, thanks police Sgt. Taylor Johanson from Kent, England, left, on May 11, 2026, for stopping a pedestrian who was assaulting Metro Police Officer Peter Kinsey, right, on May 7, 2026, just off West End Avenue on the 440 ramp. Johanson, just off the airplane, was visiting his sister, who lives in Nashville. *Provided By Metro Nashville Police Department*

Why data must guide public safety decisions

The Alliance works alongside law enforcement, community leaders and policymakers to support strategies shown to improve public safety. Evidence and data matter in these discussions because, without them, we are left with opinions disconnected from measurable outcomes.

People's feelings about safety and surveillance are real and valid.

But feelings alone cannot guide policy. That is why the Alliance is working to bring more data, context and transparency into the conversation, so public safety discussions are grounded in measurable outcomes alongside the lived experiences and concerns of residents.

An invitation to a more honest conversation

We hope people read the report, share it and engage with it – including the sections they agree with and those they do not.

We hope it sparks more curiosity, informed discussion and better questions about what we want public safety in Nashville to look like moving forward.

Public safety is shaped by all of us: by the investments we prioritize, the accountability we demand and the willingness of residents, institutions,

businesses and community leaders to work toward shared outcomes.

Nashville's future will not be determined by whether we avoid difficult conversations about public safety, but by whether we are willing to have them honestly, together and with a clear understanding of the trade-offs they require.

Halim Genus is the Chief Executive Officer of The Nashville Police + Public Safety Alliance, where he leads efforts to strengthen public safety through cross-sector collaboration, data transparency, and partnerships with community, government, and private sector leaders. Prior to joining the Alliance, he held leadership roles with Teach For America and KIPP Albany Community Public Schools, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Leadership and Public Service at Lipscomb University.



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